



FOCUS on Results

Office of Special Education and Early Intervention Services

November 2010

In FOCUS

Benton Harbor Parent Connection

The Michigan Alliance for Families was formed in 2006 with the mission of increasing parents' involvement in their children's education. Since that time, one area of focus in Michigan has been Berrien County, where parent involvement is among the lowest in the state.

When the Michigan Alliance for Families alone could not meet the area's needs, a regional parent mentor from the Alliance and an area resident developed the Benton Harbor Parent Connection as a way to connect with parents and inform and educate them.

This ***FOCUS on Results*** document includes:

- Information on Benton Harbor's Parent Connection meetings which empower parents through training, coaching, and support. ***Cover Story***
- Technical assistance on student suspensions. ***Page 3***
- Guidance on services and resources available from the Michigan Alliance for Families. ***Page 4***

This ***FOCUS on Results*** document addresses:

Parent Involvement

Benton Harbor Parents Make a Difference

It's six o'clock on a May evening in Benton Harbor. School will be out in just three weeks. The weather is perfect for a picnic, a stroll, maybe a baseball game—but more than a dozen parents feel their time is better spent crowding into the Michigan Alliance for Families office on the outskirts of town, talking about, of all things, the next school year.

This is the Benton Harbor Parent Connection's last regular meeting before summer break, and the guest speaker is Rita Seay, Benton Harbor's interim director of special education. Parents listen intently as Seay shares the district's plans for improvements in special education services, but this session is not typical of the hands-on approach that characterizes most Parent Connection meetings.

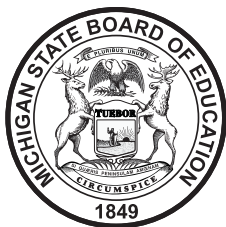
Over the past three years, the Benton Harbor Parent Connection has provided parents with in-depth Individualized Education Program (IEP) assistance, coached them in their rights and responsibilities, and provided much needed peer support, all with the goal of giving parents the knowledge and confidence they need to be more involved in their children's education.

"The [special education] system can be confusing. It can be frustrating," says one parent. "But I've learned so much from this group, and it's helped me

get more involved in my son's education. Parent Connection has been a lifeline to me."

The Michigan Alliance for Families provides information, support, and education to families of children and adults with disabilities from birth through age 25 who are in the educational system. When the Michigan Alliance for Families was formed in 2006 with the mission of increasing parents' involvement in their children's education, it was obvious that help should go where it was needed the most. One area of focus in Michigan was Berrien County, in the southwestern corner of the state. The county seat, St. Joseph, is relatively prosperous, but just across the river lies Benton Harbor, which suffers high levels of unemployment and crime. With the lowest per-capita income in the state, many households live below the poverty line. Faced with hardship of this magnitude, it is no surprise that the schools suffer financially and parent involvement is among the lowest in the state.

Michelle Miller, the Michigan Alliance for Families Project Director for Berrien County, says, "Many Benton Harbor parents did not have good experiences in school when they were younger, and they're uncomfortable in the school setting. Some have low reading levels and may feel left out at IEP meetings—or avoid them altogether. They need to



State Board of Education

Kathleen N. Straus, President
John C. Austin, Vice President
Carolyn L. Curtin, Secretary
Marianne Yared McGuire, Treasurer
Nancy Danhof, NASBE Delegate
Elizabeth W. Bauer
Reginald M. Turner
Casandra E. Ulbrich

Ex-Officio

Jennifer M. Granholm,
Governor
Michael P. Flanagan,
Superintendent of Public
Instruction



FOCUS on Results is produced and distributed through an IDEA mandated activities initiative known as the Center for Educational Networking, awarded by the Michigan Department of Education (MDE). The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the U.S. Department of Education and no endorsement is inferred. This document is in the public domain and may be copied for further distribution when proper credit is given. For more information or inquiries about this project, contact the Michigan Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Early Intervention Services, P.O. Box 30008, Lansing, MI 48909.



know that as parents they have rights and can act on behalf of their children.”

As Berrien County’s first regional parent mentor in 2006, Miller was determined to empower the parents of southwestern Michigan—especially in Benton Harbor—to take a more active role in their children’s education. She joined forces with Linda Love, a Benton Harbor resident who was the foster parent (now adoptive parent) of three children with special needs. Love had been active in *Early On*® (see definition on page 6) and with her reputation as a peacemaker and problem-solver, was a natural pick to serve as Benton Harbor’s own regional parent mentor.

In their mentorship roles with the Michigan Alliance, Miller and Love were immediately busy responding to requests for help with IEPs, suspensions, and a host of other issues. After a year and a half, however, they could see that the Alliance alone wasn’t meeting the area’s needs, especially in Benton Harbor. Instead of putting out fires, it was time to get proactive.

“Parents we had worked with kept saying that we should get this information out there to others,” says Miller. “We knew we had to find a way to connect with more parents, to inform and educate them before they fell into a crisis situation. We needed to reach out.”

And so the Benton Harbor Parent Connection was born. Miller and Love envisioned monthly meetings where parents would learn from experts and from each other. Pressing issues would be addressed, practical skills would be taught, childcare would be provided, a community would be formed. The concept was in place; now Miller and Love needed

just two things—an agenda and participants.

Choosing a first topic was easy. Uncounted “snap” suspensions had been a growing problem in schools across the state, particularly in struggling areas like Benton Harbor. A snap suspension is a teacher-initiated one-day removal from instruction. These suspensions must be reported to the principal, but too often they are not documented. Suspensions stack up while their underlying causes go unaddressed. Love had personal experience with the problem.

“My son has behavior issues from fetal alcohol syndrome,” she says. “Back when he was in kindergarten, his school was calling almost every day, asking me to come pick him up. If I couldn’t come get him, they’d put him out in the hall. Once they even had the secretary drive him home. We’d cry together about it—my son and I. I didn’t know what to do. These were suspensions, but most were not documented or counted. It was out of control and we weren’t getting to the root of the problem.”

The *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) requires that school staff meet to review a student’s behavior whenever a student with special needs has been suspended for ten days (in some cases the ten days need not be consecutive). Uncounted snap suspensions may violate this law and give an inaccurate picture of a school’s—and a student’s—history. Moreover, says Miller, “Multiple days of suspension should trigger a behavior assessment for students with IEPs. Is the misbehavior being caused by the disability? If so, a change in supports and services may be needed. If the student is

not currently eligible for special education programs and services, and if there's reason to believe the student may have a disability, multiple days of suspension should trigger an evaluation," she says. "Parents need to know this. Schools need to know this. If the suspensions aren't being counted, not only is the law being violated—the child may be missing out on assessments and services he or she needs."

"It was terrible—my baby in kindergarten was getting suspended, sometimes for three days at a time," says Love. "But through Michigan Alliance I gained confidence as an advocate for my

son, and I acted. I informed the school that they could not send him home in someone else's car without my permission. I told them that by law, any time out of instruction had to be counted and put in writing. Once I did that, the staff looked at different ways of managing the problem and the snap suspensions stopped almost completely."

Confident in her rights and eager to share her experience with others, Love went to work spreading the news about the Parent Connection. She got referrals from the Department of Human Services, made phone calls, passed out flyers, and left

Statement of Compliance With Federal Law

The Michigan Department of Education (MDE) complies with all Federal laws and regulations prohibiting discrimination and with all requirements and regulations of the U.S. Department of Education (USDoEd).

Compliance With Title IX

What Title IX is: Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 is the landmark federal law that bans sex discrimination in schools, whether it is in curricular, extra-curricular or athletic activities.

Title IX states: "No person in the U.S. shall, on the basis of sex be excluded from participation in, or denied the benefits of, or be subject to discrimination under any educational program or activity receiving federal aid."

The Michigan Department of Education (MDE) is in compliance with Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, as amended, 20 U.S.C. 1681 et seq. (Title IX), and its implementing regulation, at 34 C.F.R. Part 106, which prohibits discrimination based on sex. The MDE, as a recipient of federal financial assistance from the U.S. Department of Education (USED), is subject to the provisions of Title IX. MDE does not discriminate based on gender in employment or in any educational program or activity that it operates.

The designated individual at the MDE for inquiries and complaints regarding Title IX is:

Norma Tims, Office of Career and Technical Preparation, Michigan Department of Education, Hannah Building, 608 West Allegan, P.O. Box 30008, Lansing, MI 48909, Phone: (517) 241-2091, Email: timsn@michigan.gov.

Legal References Regarding Suspensions

According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Sec. 300.530(b)(1):

(1) School personnel under this section may remove a child with a disability who violates a code of student conduct from his or her current placement to an appropriate interim alternative educational setting, another setting, or suspension, for not more than 10 consecutive school days (to the extent those alternatives are applied to children without disabilities), and for additional removals of not more than 10 consecutive school days in that same school year for separate incidents of misconduct (as long as those removals do not constitute a change of placement under Sec. 300.536).

According to Sec. 300.536, Change of placement because of disciplinary removals:

(a) For purposes of removals of a child with a disability from the child's current educational placement under Sec. Sec. 300.530 through 300.535, a change of placement occurs if—

(1) The removal is for more than 10 consecutive school days; or

(2) The child has been subjected to a series of removals that constitute a pattern—

(i) Because the series of removals total more than 10 school days in a school year;

(ii) Because the child's behavior is substantially similar to the child's behavior in previous incidents that resulted in the series of removals; and

(iii) Because of such additional factors as the length of each removal, the total amount of time the child has been removed, and the proximity of the removals to one another.

(b)(1) The public agency determines on a case-by-case basis whether a pattern of removals constitutes a change of placement.

(2) This determination is subject to review through due process and judicial proceedings.



Visit the Michigan Alliance for Families Online

The Michigan Alliance for Families' website contains extensive information on specific disabilities, family resources, educational topics, and financial resources. It also contains links to federal, state, and local laws governing education and special education.

A directory of parent mentors and services is provided by county. Regional lectures, workshops, and training sessions are listed on two separate calendars—one for the Tri-County area (Detroit/Wayne, Oakland, and Macomb), and one for the rest of the state.

The website also contains multicultural resources, video clips, and an accessibility toolkit with links to Braille, talking books, and translation services.

www.michiganallianceforfamilies.org



Michigan Alliance for Families

The Michigan Alliance for Families provides information, support, and education to families of children with disabilities, from birth through age 25, who are in the educational system. The purpose of the project is to increase families' level of involvement in their children's education and in the educational system in general.

The work of the Michigan Alliance is based on the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) requirements to improve results for children with disabilities. It does this by helping families to:

- Know their rights, effectively communicate their children's needs, and help children develop and learn.
- Be involved in their child's education as a means of improving services and results for children with disabilities.

The Michigan Alliance believes that everyone involved in education needs access to the same information, learning, and skill-building opportunities, while having the opportunity to stay connected to each other. This is achieved through:

- An information, support, and resource center.
- Regional sites that can more personally address families' needs.
- Leadership mentoring and support.

Staff members are parents of individuals with disabilities and have experience with all aspects of the educational

system. They are trained in listening, communication, and problem-solving skills.

The Michigan Alliance connects parents to resources in their own communities. By dialing a single number, (800) 552-4821, callers are directed to a regional office in their own area, or, if there's no local office, to an information specialist who is covering their area. Currently, the state is served by 20 offices, distributed roughly by population across the upper and lower peninsulas. No one should be more than a two-hour drive from the nearest regional center.

Each regional site is staffed with a parent mentor with expertise in disability and educational issues and who is familiar with community resources. In addition to personally advising and mentoring local parents, each regional parent mentor hosts a series of learning opportunities for parents, which include:

- Overview of the Individualized Education Program (IEP).
- Parents' role in the IEP.
- Transitions.
- Positive behavioral interventions and supports.
- Assistive technology.
- Rights and responsibilities.

Regional parent mentors also provide leadership training for parents with skill-building activities in such areas as:

- School governance.
- Problem solving.
- Negotiation.
- Advisory groups: roles and expectations.

brochures in counselors' offices. Ten people showed up for the first monthly meeting; since then the group has nearly doubled in size, with many more showing up for special topics.

During its first two years, the Parent Connection focused mainly on behavior issues. "We taught parents their rights regarding suspension and expulsion, and the importance of having their child correctly identified with the proper services," says Miller. "We also helped parents formulate a positive behavior plan for their child in order to help reduce the number of suspensions."

Although the Parent Connection will advocate or help parents find an advocate, advocacy is not really the group's role, says Love. "We try to build the parents up, and give them the strength and knowledge to advocate for themselves. We're teaching the parents to hold the schools accountable, but also to build strong partnerships with the schools. I always say the important word is 'we.' What can WE do to help the student learn? It's parents and schools together."

Rita Seay, Benton Harbor's interim director of special education, views the Michigan Alliance as a partner in her work with schools and families, and values the contribution made by the Parent Connection. "The Michigan Alliance has been very committed to providing whatever support parents and students may need. And the Parent Connection has been a positive force in our area—it coaches parents in how to be supportive of their children and it builds parent involvement."

Last summer, the Parent Connection held a special session to help parents understand their children's schoolwork, especially

reading and math. "This was the most popular thing we've done so far," says Miller. "Thirty people turned out on a July morning to learn how to boost literacy and help their kids with homework. The great thing is, these are parents that a lot of teachers would have written off as not being invested in their kids' education. It just shows that most parents want to be there for their kids."

In the fall of 2009, Margo Pierce joined the team as regional parent mentor for Berrien County when Miller moved to her new post as Project Director. During the 2009-2010 school year, Parent Connection meetings focused on the IEP process. "The IEP process can be so overwhelming," says Miller. "And it takes a while to assimilate. We thought, wouldn't it be great to take it one part at a time and build on the parents' knowledge month by month."

The group broke the IEP training down into five key components, addressing one each month. The Present Level of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance (PLAAFP) Statement (see definition on page 6), Goals and Objectives, Accommodations and Modifications, Services and Supports, and Placement, were all covered separately and in detail. Parents were encouraged to bring their child's IEP to the meetings for case-specific help. "My daughter is 15 now," says Miller. "If I had learned the IEP this way when she was younger, she'd be so much further ahead. I'd have known the right questions to ask. I'd have known how to interpret the data."

Armed with the knowledge gained through the Parent Connection, the regular members have become increasingly confident and active participants in their children's IEP process. And their

Michelle Miller, Project Director, Michigan Alliance for Families

1380 E. Napier Ave., Ste. 4
Benton Harbor, MI 49022

Phone: (800) 552-4821

Email: michelle@michiganallianceforfamilies.org





The Center for Educational Networking (CEN) is a statewide education information network that produces and disseminates publications and documents related to the education of students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs).

CEN produces **FOCUS on Results** to offer valuable, up-to-date information for special education stakeholders, including parents, teachers, school administrators, counselors, and others.

If you would like to receive email updates when new issues of **FOCUS on Results** are available, send a request to info@cenmi.org or visit <http://focus.cenmi.org> and click on "Email Updates" located at the bottom right of the website. Here you will also find a link for subscribing to the RSS feed.

Download copies of **FOCUS on Results** at:

<http://focus.cenmi.org>

If you need assistance making this publication accessible for a person with a visual impairment, or for more information or inquiries about this document, contact the Center for Educational Networking at (888) 463-7656 or info@cenmi.org.



involvement doesn't stop there. Some have also joined the superintendent's new "Parents Making a Difference" committee, and some are considering leadership roles in their local Parent Advisory Committees (PACs) and Parent Teacher Organizations (PTOs). "These parents have bonded," says Miller, "and they're volunteering in the schools for the first time ever. It's great to see."

Miller, Love, and Pierce extended the Parent Connection through the summer, offering tutoring sessions several times each week. They

plan to add daytime meetings in the next school year so that parents can attend while their children are in school.

Love acknowledges that lack of transportation can be problematic in a district where many people don't have cars, but says, "My heart goes out to my community. I'll even offer a dollar-ride token for people to get here. My dream is to have parents from every school in Benton Harbor coming to these meetings, and not just moms—dads too—because parents really do make a difference."

FOCUS Highlights

- The Benton Harbor Parent Connection provides parents with in-depth Individualized Education Program (IEP) assistance, coaching on their rights and responsibilities, and peer support geared toward giving parents the knowledge and confidence they need to be more involved in their children's education.
- The IDEA requirements regarding suspensions of students with disabilities.

Glossary of Terms

Early On® Michigan: Each state in the U.S. has an early intervention system. In Michigan, it is called *Early On*. This system of early intervention services is for infants and toddlers, birth to three years of age, with developmental delay(s) and/or disabilities and their families. *Early On* supports families as their children learn and grow.

Present Level of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance (PLAAFP): The PLAAFP is the starting point for the development of the IEP which considers academic achievement and the student's functional performance. The PLAAFP identifies where the student is functioning as it relates to where he or she wants to go.

Resources

Early On® Michigan
www.1800earlyon.org

Individuals With Disabilities Education Act
<http://idea.ed.gov>

Michigan Alliance for Families
www.michiganallianceforfamilies.org